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Keywords: Jean-Luc Godard; Walter Benjamin; Brechtian aesthetic; political cinema; Marxism
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The aesthetics of living historically: Godard's *Tout va Bien* (1972)

Jeremy Spencer¹

Abstract

This essay considers what film-makers Godard and Gorin meant when they say that the protagonists of their 1972 film, *Tout va Bien* have begun to live their lives “historically.” I suggest that this relatively cryptic formulation, in a similar way to the visual form and technique of *Tout va Bien*, is largely Brechtian in nature. My intention is to provide an exposition of aspects of *Tout va Bien*, uncritical of Godard’s and Gorin’s practice of making films politically, but I anticipate that the essay supplements an understanding of this film. I consider the idea or expectation of living historically to be theoretically and philosophically fertile, evoking discussions of history and historical experience in different traditions of thought. Writers such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Benjamin are relevant interlocutors, able to elaborate Godard and Gorin’s resolution to live historically.

Keywords: Jean-Luc Godard; Walter Benjamin; Brechtian aesthetic; political cinema; Marxism

Tout va Bien (1972) is a political film written and directed by Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin. It is fiction and relatively commercial film, featuring “international stars,” Yves Montand and Jane Fonda. Montand plays “Him” or Jacques, previously a screenwriter during the *nouvelle vague* (reminiscent of Godard’s own career), who now directs television commercials for Dim tights and Remington razors. Jacques defends his advertising work as more “honest” than his earlier career of making art films for aesthetes. Fonda plays “Her” or Susan DeWitt, an American journalist working in France for the “American Broadcasting System”. In the second segment of the film, Jacques accompanies Susan to interview workers at a salumi factory during a wildcat strike and occupation. The couple are held hostage by the “hooligans”.

The strike is not supported by the trade union: the official union representative of the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail) labels the striking workers “Maoist” and “Leftist”. Susan interviews the striking workers and the politically sophisticated factory manager, played by the Italian actor, Vittorio Caprioli. His spoken lines derive from a book called *Long Live the Consumer Society* (1971) by essayist and novelist Jean Saint-Geours.² The manager defends capitalist society and dismisses the ideas of Marx and Engels. During the occupation, workers are shown laughing at and humiliating the manager. He’s called a little louse – a worker uses the word “toto” – something very small, something inconsequential; there’s a sense of tables being turned. Interviewed by Susan, women factory workers describe their

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²See Roud, “Tout Va Bien,” 123.

working conditions, the nature of the exploitation, the gendered humiliations they experience. Jacques and Susan are released following the intervention of the police breaking the strike, an event which happens off screen, and they return to their ordinary lives.

This essay addresses the existential conclusion of *Tout va Bien* – the arresting and initially puzzling notion of living historically and the expectation that we should live, or that we should learn to live, historically. What it means to live historically is addressed by the film critic Andrew Britton in a 1976 essay on political cinema that contrasts *Tout va Bien* favourably to Godard and Gorin's earlier *Le Vent d'est* (1969). Britton describes living historically as an undogmatic willingness to be receptive to others' beliefs and to be open to change. For Britton, living historically is characteristic of the individualist and humanist politics of *Tout va Bien*.³ His interpretation can help illuminate one of the film's interwoven narratives, which Godard and Gorin introduce self-consciously and ironically, the "love story." If a film needs to tell a story why not tell a love story – Gorin has commented that he and Godard had thought of calling *Tout va Bien*, "Love Story." International film stars like Fonda and Montand, the voice over explains, will need to know the story or plot before they'll agree to appear, and it's usually a love story: "They'd be Him and Her and they'd have relationship problems". So, in one sense, *Tout va Bien* is a love story of an unhappy marriage signified humorously by an early scene where Him and Her argue, the voice over remarks this will be "a nice story about zombies". However, as Kristen Thompson points out, *Tout va bien* "never becomes a straight Hollywood romance; the context-less love scene by the river that introduces Jacques and Susan [they stroll beside a scruffy river bank holding hands] never returns".⁴

We are told that that beneath the "calm surface" of French society everything is changing; Him and Her are swept up in these social changes and they will also change psychologically; they will be open to "constructive change" as Britton suggests, but this possibility is dependent on a different or altered personal relation to French society which has emerged in the aftermath of May-June 1968. Aesthetically, this changed relation is given an avowedly Brechtian form and influenced by the remarks on change, personal experience, on changing the subjective and objective worlds and the relations between them, from Mao's 1937 lecture "On Practice." It is their involvement in the strike that changes Jacques and Susan, afterwards they begin to think of their lives historically.

So, learning to live historically involves a relationship to lived experience that is Brechtian in form in *Tout va Bien*. What becomes something like an exhortation – but Godard and Gorin encourage rather than preach – to live historically implies a historical consciousness and the figure of the historian: *Tout va Bien*'s protagonists become their own historians at the film's end. Distanciation as a distinct aesthetic or a mode of representation explains what Godard and Gorin's exhortation to live historically might involve. Distanciation, the beginning of understanding for Bertolt Brecht, introduces difference and doubt, it involves "turning the object of which one is to be made aware ... from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected".⁵ In this sense, to live historically is to alienate personal experience or the subjective world in its natural immediacy to conceive life – lived experience – objectively as historically determined and as the *result* of social forces and struggle and so experience, in Lukács' words, a "new feeling for the historical

³Britton, "Living Historically: Two films by Jean-Luc Godard."

⁴Thompson, "Sawing through the bough: *Tout va Bien* as a Brechtian film," 122.

⁵Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 143.

connections of life”.⁶

Tout va Bien does represent a return to a more commercial or traditional filmmaking compared to other films Godard and Gorin produced collaboratively under the name of the Soviet director Dziga Vertov – the name “Groupe Dziga-Vertov” fades or begins to efface the signature and the value of the proper name “Godard.” However, Godard and Gorin employ Brechtian strategies of representation characteristic of epic theatre – distancing and separations in the narrative and the constitutive elements of the film – Brecht describes an effect or result of the stylistic techniques or methods of epic theatre as “a radical *separation of elements*.”⁷ Speaking to camera, as if being interviewed during a break from filming a commercial for Dim (this commercial in *Tout va Bien* is clearly a straight pastiche of an actual advertisement, “Slips de Dim,” produced by William Klein in 1971), Jacques directly references Brecht, his “fantastic” preface to his opera, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, first performed in 1927. The long and apparently naturalistic “interview” with Jacques evokes the conventions of documentary film rather than the romance or love story initially promised. The interior of the factory is self-consciously acknowledged to be a stage set and the audience is denied the (pleasurable) illusion that it is an unseen spectator or voyeur of a real event. On screen, the occupied factory becomes a kind of funny or silly image, it looks like an opened doll’s house with a transparent fourth wall, revealing offices and their inhabitants, connecting stairs, and so on. The factory as a kind of set is shown through tracking shots. If an ideology of the cinema involves denying the existence of the screen, imagining

it as transparent, and opening like a window to a space beyond, then Godard and Gorin seem to (comically) stage this ideology. The film foregrounds its artificiality and conditions of its production in other ways, for instance, workers are dressed in white overalls splattered with obviously fake blood.

However, despite its explicit Brechtian aesthetics and influence, critics associated with the British film journal *Screen*, writing in the earlier 1970s, questioned the film’s “plenitude” and “homogeneity” and its apparent return to what Brecht would describe as Aristotelian representation.⁸ For Peter Wollen, the film “abandons avant-gardism for a stylised didacticism, set within a classical realist frame”.⁹ However, as I observed above, there are frequent and slyly comedic Brechtian moments in the film. So, the “Groupe Lou Sin d’intervention idéologique” wrote in *Cahiers du Cinema* how *Tout va Bien* is an icily intimidating film in the ways it resists the spectator’s “immediate consumption,” arresting superficial pleasures, because, although it originates or begins with realities of the factory and strike, it accentuates them, exemplifying the different political and ideological discourses in play and in conflict, so that the film lacks the natural fluidity of lived experience.¹⁰ For Gorin, the politics of film was always a question of form and expression rather than simply “content” and *Tout va Bien* does emphasise the materiality or physicality of film as sound and image and foregrounds cinema as a social practice despite an overt and distinguishing embrace of fiction, pleasure, and entertainment.

What it means for the film’s protagonists to live historically is suggestive of reflections on history and historical experience in the writ-

⁶Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 172.

⁷Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 37.

⁸MacCabe, “Brecht Event IV: The politics of separation,” 55.

⁹Wollen, “The two avant-gardes,” 102.

¹⁰Groupe Lou Sin d’intervention idéologique, “Les Luites de Classe En France: Deux Films: ‘Coup Pour Coup,’ ‘Tout va Bien,’” 21.

ing of Marx and Engels, Nietzsche, and Walter Benjamin. Marx's conception of modernity, of an individual's relationship to historical time in terms of an abandonment of the past, is emphatically expressed in Nietzsche's "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life," published in 1874. Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), which analyses the politics and aesthetics of the aftermath of the 1848 revolution in France and the coup d'état of Louis Bonaparte in December 1851, conceives the social or proletarian revolution of nineteenth century in terms of forgetting past traditions. Bourgeois revolutions, in contrast, are characterised by Marx as aesthetic, in terms of necessary appropriations of historical imagery – the bourgeoisie of 1789 resurrects the dead to blind and numb itself to the prosaic content of its historical tasks. Borrowing and mimicry are either tragic or farcical acts, involving ill-fitting costumes and duplicitous masks. In this sense, individuals live historically palpably or literally. More recently, the possibility of historical consciousness was dismissed in Francis Fukuyama's vision of a post-historical civilisation following the conclusion of the historical challenge to global capitalism of a communism flowing from the Bolshevik Revolution. Fukuyama's espousal of a post-historical consciousness as the consequence of the triumph of liberal capitalism appears to refute historical knowledge. For Nietzsche, rooting historical action in forgetting, praxis will involve rejecting the historical appropriations at the heart of the aesthetic politics of modern societies as analysed by Walter Benjamin in his "The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility" (1936). For Nietzsche, historical instinct reduces men to "shadows" engaged in "a mere puppet play".¹¹ Nietzsche wants us to act in an "untimely" way, that is, "counter to our time".¹²

Humanity envies the animal contained entirely in the present moment, which through forgetting what will become the past, can live "unhistorically".¹³ Humanity enviously discovers "a lost paradise" in seeing herds grazing or a child playing: animals and children are without a past, which is either immediately forgotten or not yet accrued and are therefore in a state of blissful forgetfulness. The ability to remember the past which is inimical to the present and therefore understand the contingency of the present moment is a cause of suffering, which for Nietzsche, can be relieved by death. If humanity wants to live happily and healthily, it must have a "capacity to feel unhistorically," something animals and children naturally possess and on which happiness depends.¹⁴

Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the concept of history" (written in 1940 and first published in French in October 1947) reflect on historical materialism, historicism, and historical memory. Benjamin asks historical materialism to remember the past, to embed a politics in forgotten generations. Benjamin evokes forgotten generations in recognition that culture is also a record of barbarism; the forgotten and anonymous producers of culture are the subject of Brecht's poem, "A worker reads history" (1935). The theses were written as experimental and methodological "reflections" on history in preparation for Benjamin's work on Charles Baudelaire and the culture and the personas of nineteenth century modernity. They were motivated by the victories of fascism, the outbreak of the Second World War, and the betrayal of the non-aggression pact between the USSR and Germany signed by Molotov and Ribbentrop in August 1939. Benjamin's theses critique the historicism of contemporary social democracy which retained an uncritical faith in historical progress in a series of allu-

¹¹Nietzsche, "The use and abuse of history," 84.

¹²Nietzsche, 60.

¹³Nietzsche, 61.

¹⁴Nietzsche, 62.

sive and allegorical images. It was assumed that human history *automatically* progresses or that the simple the flow of time guarantees progress. Benjamin criticises the misguided faith of the Social Democratic Party of Germany in social and technological progress – with technological progress determining or promising social progress. Social democracy was in thrall to an overly optimistic and for Benjamin “questionable” view of progress influenced by an evolutionary understanding of history and belief in the inevitability of the victory of socialism.¹⁵ “Nothing has so corrupted the German working class,” he writes, “as the notion that it was moving with the current”.¹⁶ Benjamin emphasises the destructive energy of history driven by the assumption of progress, an emphasis that can help explain his conception of revolution as humanity pulling the emergency brake on a speeding train and so a kind of interruption.¹⁷

The much discussed ninth thesis – Michael Löwy remarks that the text “has the imagination of our age” – introduces the image of an angel of history, who allegorises the figure of the historian or intellectual. Benjamin’s description of the angel is, loosely, an ekphrasis, and the ninth thesis has Paul Klee’s small oil-transfer *Angelus Novus* as its visual prototype. Benjamin valued Klee’s work and had purchased *Angelus Novus* in Munich in 1921.¹⁸ The angel was assigned a place above Benjamin’s sofa; everyone was pleased with him. Klee’s *Angelus Novus* is a kind of tracing of a drawing. It is like a print – the technique of oil-transfer appears frequently in the works Klee produced between 1919 and 1925. The picture

is largely monochromatic, mainly in shades of ochre with areas of pale yellow and orange – Klee has added washes to the traced figure of the angel. The figure is flattened out, almost diagrammatic, compressed under the picture plane; the pictorial space the angel inhabits is empty and flat, modernist. The angel of history that Benjamin conceives resembles Klee’s picture. However, Klee’s angel appears more bird-like than the tragically severe and *modern* persona that Benjamin evokes.¹⁹ Its head, topped by curly hair, is a little too big for its bird-like body, his uneven teeth are a little too prominent in his open mouth. The angel does appear to be winged, but the figure extends open arms that only *suggest* wings as a kind of extension.²⁰ As such, Werckmeister sees the wings as artificial or mechanical – the “new angel” is thus mortal or profane, and has invented a technology, a contraption, or an apparatus to fly. The angel (or new, modern man) has a feathered tail, and talons or claws, which are also easily human fingers and toes – Benjamin’s close friend Gershom Scholem remarks on the Satanic character of the angel.²¹

Benjamin’s angel faces the past which he sees as “single catastrophe” that creates ever more wreckage of the “cultural tradition”; its debris are hurled down at the angel’s feet. Where the angel sees the continuity of historical events as a catastrophe, *we* see a chain of differentiated events. Benjamin relates the “catastrophe in permanence” the angel witnesses to Baudelaire’s evocations of spleen. Benjamin symbolises history as catastrophic by the revolutionary image of a “child’s kaleidoscope” by

¹⁵ Benjamin, “Eduard Fuchs, collector and historian,” 273.

¹⁶ Benjamin, “On the concept of history,” 393.

¹⁷ Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On the concept of history,’” 402.

¹⁸ Benjamin wrote to Gerhard Scholem in July 1920 that he “was particularly pleased with an extremely beautiful painting by Klee, entitled *The Presentation of the Miracle* [made in 1916]. Are you familiar with Klee? I really love him and this is the most beautiful of all his paintings I have seen”. See Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 165.

¹⁹ See Löwy, *Fire Alarm*.

²⁰ See Werckmeister, “Walter Benjamin, Paul Klee, and the angel of history.”

²¹ Scholem, “Walter Benjamin and his angel,” 222.

which, through one simple twist, the turn or movement of the child's hand, one established order after another is swiftly and repetitively dissolved and re-arrayed.²² Initially appearing revolutionary, the kaleidoscope symbolises “order,” understood as just one moment within permanent or continuous catastrophe. Benjamin thinks the kaleidoscope “must be smashed”.²³

The angel cannot intervene in human history to “make whole” what is carelessly destroyed because its wings are forced open by the winds of a storm “blowing from Paradise” that “drives [the angel] irresistibly into the future”.²⁴ The storm allegorises historical progress, a concept that had lost the critical function it once possessed for Benjamin. He wanted his analysis of the cultural and social forms of nineteenth century Paris to “demonstrate a historical materialism which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress”.²⁵ To be recoverable at all, the concept must be grounded in a definition of modernity as catastrophe. It is catastrophic, Benjamin argues, that this existing social and historical order is seemingly so unremarkable and ordinary; we are unaware that “hell is not something that awaits us, but *this life in the here and now*”.²⁶ As I have said above, it was naively assumed that human history *automatically* progresses or that the simple flow of interrupted time guarantees progress. The storm blowing in from Paradise evokes the Biblical narrative of the Fall and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden as punishment for Eve's rebellion, her desire for knowledge, and her seduction by Satan to eat fruit from the tree of knowledge of

good and evil, the one act prohibited by God. It is arguable that for Benjamin, Paradise is the classless society of prehistory while the assumption of progress is associated with modernity as hellish, which drives modern subjects to despair.²⁷

The angel allegorises the figure of the historian and Benjamin's descriptions – a “seer” or “a prophet facing backward” – resemble his angel of history from the ninth thesis. Thus, the seer's “visionary gaze” is turned towards the “rapidly receding past” which is fading before his eyes, which sinks into darkness; the historian turns “away from the future”.²⁸ The angel, like the historian, is mesmerized by the transience of events, their ephemerality; he perceives the past differently, as Benjamin emphasises. For Benjamin, the precondition of living historically is the liberation of historical understanding from “the schema of progression within an empty and homogeneous time”.²⁹ To live historically is to abandon belief in uninterrupted social progress through continuous and “empty time” and the naïve faith in the proletariat as the “redeemer of *future* generations” rather than the objectional description of the proletariat as the “avenger” of the dead. In this sense, Benjamin contradicts Marx's emphasis on forgetting “past world history” in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. For Benjamin, the social revolution will *remember* rather than “bury the dead” – the enslaved ancestors of the working class that produced culture. It was this “indoctrination,” Benjamin writes, by its own ideologies of progress that “made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished

²² Benjamin, “Central Park,” 164.

²³ Benjamin, 164.

²⁴ Benjamin, “On the concept of history,” 392.

²⁵ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 460.

²⁶ Benjamin, “Central Park,” 184–85.

²⁷ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 63.

²⁸ Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On the concept of history’,” 407.

²⁹ Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On the concept of history’,” 406.

by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren”.³⁰

The idea of living historically as conceived in *Tout va Bien* involves strategies drawn from Marxist social and aesthetic theories or can be understood on their terms. Like that of Marx and Engels of *The German Ideology* (1847), *Tout va Bien*’s conception of historical life is antithetical to teleological view of history and the related tendency to personify it, imagining its aims and destiny. In living historically, him and her will lose, in Benjamin’s words, “the semblance of eternal sameness”.³¹ In reflecting on his appropriation of historical materialism for the analysis of the forms and the mutations of the Paris arcades, Benjamin described historical understanding as the “afterlife of that which is understood,” which means its continued influence or the possibility of its renewal in being employed and experienced in new ways: Benjamin uses the word “fame” to describe it,³² which for Nietzsche is a “protest against ... the transitoriness of things”.³³ Benjamin did not think we ever experienced history in an unmediated way; the “structure” of historical understanding for Benjamin was that of montage; he does not conceive the relationship between what was and what is now as progression; “suddenly emergent” images displace progression or continuity in Benjamin’s theory of history.³⁴ The image is the beginning of historical understanding: images not only belong to a particular conjuncture but are only legible at a particular time. Benjamin’s discussion suggests how Godard and Gorin juxtapose the France of 1968 and of 1972 when the *Tout va Bien* was made: him and her compare, they recognise the difference between their “what-

has been” to their “now”. For Nietzsche, borrowing from history is a kind of “prop” and historical action is founded on forgetting. His argument is that historical action depends on the ability to forget whereas historical understanding leads merely to passive retrospection. Nietzsche’s alternatives do not seem to make sense of *Tout va Bien* in which retrospection is not inimical to action. Although *Tout va Bien* does not simply reduce history to “man” – to the lived or existential experience of its protagonists – it is not a humanism in this sense or indeed a love story – the audience is not just led back “to men and the relations between men” – self-knowledge is in dialectical relation to history in the film. “History [is] the history of the objective forms from which man’s environment and inner world are constructed and which he strives to master in thought, action, and art”.³⁵ It is through the operation of an estrangement as theorised and practiced by Brecht, if not the “dangerous mood of irony” that historical sense, culture, or knowledge engenders for Nietzsche, that this mastery might be achieved.³⁶

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³⁰ Benjamin, *ibid.*, 394.

³¹ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 473.

³² Benjamin, 460.

³³ Nietzsche, “The use and abuse of history,” 69.

³⁴ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 462.

³⁵ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 188.

³⁶ Nietzsche, “The use and abuse of history,” 83.

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